



## **150 Years of Books With PW**

**Interview with  
George Slowik, Jr., CEO  
*Publishers Weekly***

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KENNEALLY: That year a century and a half ago, the Metropolitan Museum of Art first opened in New York City in February. In November, American suffragist Susan B. Anthony cast her vote for US President and was promptly arrested. English composer Ralph Vaughan Williams was born. And Mary Somerville, the first female member of the Royal Astronomical Society, died.

Welcome to Velocity of Content. I'm Christopher Kenneally for CCC.

Also in 1872, American publishers wishing to keep booksellers and librarians informed of forthcoming titles began a new periodical, soon known as the *Publishers Weekly*. The magazine has since chronicled the arrival of hundreds of thousands of books as well as the comings and goings of many publishing concerns, all over an estimated 700,000 pages.

In May 2021, *Publishers Weekly* launched the US Book Show, an online showcase of the latest books and most popular authors, which returns this month. In 2010, George Slowik purchased *Publishers Weekly* with his late partner, Patrick Turner. He joins me today from New York City. Welcome to the program, George, and congratulations on *PW*'s milestone year.

SLOWIK: Thank you, Chris. Delighted to be here and happy to be representing *PW*.

KENNEALLY: Well, we're happy you can do that, and on this very special occasion as well, the 150th anniversary of the first publication of what has become the bible of the book business. And in aspiring to be in that role, how does *PW* try to balance the differing, even competing interests of all the various parts of your audience – the audiences – publishers, booksellers, authors?

SLOWIK: It's a challenge. It's one of the fascinating aspects of *Publishers Weekly*, in that we do cover the horizon of publishing and traditionally have covered from agent through to bookseller or librarian – so reseller. When I bought the magazine in 2010, and courtesy of



all things electronic, we actually extended the audience on both ends to more broadly service authors themselves and then also consumers – that is, readers. That made it even more difficult, but at least electronic allows you to do a variety of things. So we have a number of newsletters and a number of products that service individual components of our readership, with an eye always towards trying to make sure everyone has a full plate.

KENNEALLY: As you point out, George, *PW* began as a publication for the trade, but with the arrival of the web, your audience has grown to include readers and the public. What have they brought to the conversation?

SLOWIK: It's really a wonderful time in terms of the feedback loop. In days of yore – I was a publisher in the late '80s, early '90s, working for Reed. In fact, I acquired *Publishers Weekly* for Reed. I was part of the team that made that acquisition. And getting one letter was a big deal. (laughter) Oh my God, what have we done? Now, you can be flooded rather quickly with feedback, good and bad. It keeps you on your toes, and it's made the conversation – and the fact that we can have a dialogue makes everything, I think, more crisp and more interesting.

KENNEALLY: And the special edition of the magazine which was guest-edited by Michael Coffey, a former co-editorial director, focuses on the last 25 years, the period from 1997 to today. Of all the many changes we've seen in that period of time, what's the most heartening one for you?

SLOWIK: I think it is all things electronic. In 2010, there were the Chicken Littles running around saying, oh, it's the end of the book, not unlike times when radio began or TV or CD-ROMs. Even distribution in department stores was meant to kill bookstores. So all things electronic have really opened us up to a much broader audience, both in the trade and with consumers. We are still a trade publication, though, and our primary purpose is to service the industry of book publishing.

KENNEALLY: It's interesting to hear you say the digital revolution has done you good. It's done a good turn for *PW*. But I want to ask you about the book business, or *PW*, for that matter. What are some worrisome trends that you see?

SLOWIK: I think the continued consolidation is a challenge. It's born out of economics, and the large houses do try to keep internal competition going. And it's natural, because a book is not a commodity that you can just put out SKUs. Someone has to read it, first of all, and then the work begins of editing and design and enhancing the approach of the book. So that dynamic is all the more vigorous when you have ease of communication in a more fluid manner between the originator of the text and the end user. And the end user – the reader does, in fact, often impact content, at least future books.



KENNEALLY: And the special edition – which does focus, as we say, on the period from 1997 to today – has to acknowledge the fact that there are fewer newspapers publishing book reviews – certainly than in 1997, and probably fewer than ever in the past. I wonder whether that means that *PW* reviews matter more than ever.

SLOWIK: I think they do. They serve a purpose that's quite different than, say, what one can receive on the web broadly. Particularly in this time of disinformation and alternate facts and Lord knows what, to have an imprimatur of *Publishers Weekly* that's credible and trustworthy and consistent is valuable to those who come to rely on the point of view. Because no matter what role you play within the industry, you can't very well consume all the products that it produces in a year, and certainly not these days with self-publishing publishing more than a million books just here in the States.

KENNEALLY: Industry news coverage certainly has changed in the last quarter-century as well, and *PW* reporters today compete with Twitter and social media of all kinds. Has that changed what you cover at *PW* and how?

SLOWIK: It has. To be in a world of 24/7/365 and maybe down to 60-second news, it's hard to do breaking news and more important to do context – what in newspaper parlance was called a second-day story where you got deeper into the implications of that breaking news, because it's virtually impossible to break a piece of news, because generally the originator of that news, the author, is going to break it themselves. The porous nature of all things electronic – there are more people with early access to books than ever before and more people opining as they see fit about individual titles and the authors and their lives. It's so much broader that I think we've had to change our news coverage, most notably.

The reviews are still pretty much the way they were in terms of being a finite resource that publishers can use early on and booksellers and librarians can rely on to select books and now consumers. We broadly license our reviews, so you'll find them en masse in the Amazon environment, the Google environment, with Apple, etc., and all the library products, the reviews are there. And there's probably more than half a million primary reviews now that relate to close to a couple million products, because there's an audio, there's a large print, there's a paperback, there's an international edition. So just that linkage provides more readership to the reviews.

KENNEALLY: George Slowik, you referred to the reviews in *PW* as a resource for readers, for librarians, and for editors and other authors, even. Another really important resource is the US Book Show, which began last year in 2021 and returns this year on May 23rd for four



days of author interviews as well as roundtable discussions with editors and industry executives. So give us a preview. What can we look forward to?

**SLOWIK:** Last year was our first time out, and it was a fairly large learning curve. We sought to fill a gap left by the fact that there wasn't a live show in the US, and a few years prior had tried the New York Rights Fair focusing specifically on rights. But the US Book Show is much broader, and the interaction between the authors and editors is really quite satisfying. You don't normally see eight editors from different houses in that kind of Brady Bunch frame with an editor in the middle arbitrating between them and them having a dialogue with each other about their own books. It's really quite delightful. And the scope of it allows us to really dig into diversity issues and represent diverse populations and books that are of appeal to them.

By and large, it is all based in the book, if you will. It's title-driven. We bring lots of prominent authors and controversial authors to the mix. I'm not even sure which ones I can name at this point, because there are various negotiations going on. But last year, we had everyone from Oprah and Liz Warren to Anthony Doerr and Padma Lakshmi and Keanu Reeves and Steven Van Zandt. So they were sort of pop-type people and serious authors as well. Not to suggest the others aren't serious, but it's a different sort of product and book that they produce. So the breadth is really quite appealing.

**KENNEALLY:** Well, George Slowik, the occasion of the 150th anniversary has been an opportunity to pause and reflect on the past and talk about the present with the US Book Show. But as a way to end our discussion, tell me about what you expect to see PW covering in the future, in the years ahead. Is there an area of the book business you're watching more closely these days? Audiobooks and graphic novels are hot right now. Do you think they'll come to dominate the business?

**SLOWIK:** I don't, actually. I think that like other categories, they will continue to expand. The beauty of the internet and the global interaction allow titles to move more freely across what were language barriers. Just the fact that you can translate into 56 languages with the push of a button gives access that never existed. It may not be the literary read of the book, but it is an opportunity to explore it. And most people then convert to buying a book in their own language. But that access not only by geographic and language diversity, but also by interest group – there is now a pocket of people who care about a particular topic that can access and be published, too. They can be targeted. I was fascinated in the roundup of different stories when the conservative press really reported on how there were no longer gatekeepers, so they could get to their audience directly. So it is a new element of the book business.



I think *Publishers Weekly* will continue to thrive both in print and continue to expand electronically with a variety of niche products and doing things like the US Book Show and will continue to add to those 700,000 pages of digital content. The archive is such a fascinating exploration that I'm often caught in that rabbit hole myself looking up something that occurred to me, much like, I guess, we all do with the Google opportunity.

But for the future, I think technology will continue to evolve. Format will continue to evolve. NFTs are the latest play toy that we're exploring and that publishers are beginning to explore. Whether or not that turns into independent products or merely another way of communicating about the books that we have really doesn't matter, because what it's allowing is another way to package content in a way that's enticing to people – and particularly to younger, newer audiences, which I think is a great opportunity for the book business as well.

So I don't think anyone niche is going to suddenly knock everything out, like graphic novels. They're an interesting and new approach. They'll do very well in NFTs, in my opinion, because they are indeed graphic. But they won't replace the book. We'll be here talking about it in 25 years, hopefully. (laughter) Well, maybe not me. But it'll be around.

KENNEALLY: All right. Well, congratulations again on the 150th anniversary of *Publishers Weekly*, and here's to the next couple hundred thousand pages.

SLOWIK: Thank you. Thank you.

KENNEALLY: George Slowik, president, chairman, and owner of *Publishers Weekly*, thanks for joining me.

SLOWIK: Thank you for having me.

KENNEALLY: That's all for now. Our producer is Jeremy Brieske of Burst Marketing. I'm Christopher Kenneally for Velocity of Content from CCC.

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